An evaluation of task-based learning (TBL) in the Japanese classroom

CHRISTIAN BURROWS

A study of the need for attention to cultural aspects of task-based learning and teaching of English as a foreign language

Introduction

In recent years applied linguistics has seen a move away from a linguistic syllabus to one built around the sequencing of real-life, communicative tasks. This shift, it is argued, offers a richer exposure to language use, while providing the motivation required for students to build on their existing language repertoire. Proponents claim this use of the language satisfies what is known about second language acquisition, by furnishing contexts that make the learning process closer to real-life language situations, as:

> People of all ages learn languages best, inside or outside a classroom, by not treating the languages as an object of study, but by experiencing them as a medium of communication. (Long & Robinson, 1998:18)

The different phases of TBL are intended to maximize pedagogical and interactional focus on completion of the task (Seedhouse, 1999), thereby satisfying the four conditions of exposure, motivation, real language, and a focus on form, which Willis claims are needed to effectively learn a second language (Willis & Willis, 1996:59). This emphasis on 'fluency as the basis for linguistic accuracy' (Willis & Willis, 1996:45) maintains that the variety of interaction produced is more productive to language development than the actual linguistic forms used. This divergence from a typical CLA (Critical Language Awareness) approach affords students the linguistic freedom to choose from their existing resources to focus a broader range of lexicon when completing the task, rather than 'bits and pieces of language' in isolation (Brown, 1994:229).

Such a rejection of traditional form-focused activities assumes that students can internalize grammatical features, in addition to producing the rich and varied lexical items necessary to help language competence gradually improve (Willis, 1996). It is claimed that it is this application of existing linguistic knowledge which links cognitive learning to linguistic functions encompassed by task completion, allowing 'the unit of syllabus design to drive [students'] system forward' (Willis & Willis, 1996:10). This interaction, at the heart of TBL, means success (however one measures it) depends on the degree and nature of student involvement.

Despite these goals, the effectiveness of TBL is influenced by several factors prominent in 'collectivist countries' such as Japan (Hofstede, 1986, p.312). These cognitive and socio-cultural factors may collectively account for the weakening of the approach in this setting.



CHRISTIAN BURROWS teaches English at the International Pacific University, in Okayama, Japan. He holds an MA in TESOL from the University of Birmingham (England), and is undertaking a Ph.D. into preferred communicative strategies used among learners from non-individualist countries. Email: c.burrows@ipu-japan.ac.jp

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However, it must be recognized that although these factors may also influence other teaching methodologies, the scope of this paper is restricted to TBL only, and therefore does not make generalisations about their general effectiveness. The factors include:

1. The learning style of Japanese students.
2. The learning expectations of Japanese students.
3. Socio-cultural differences.
4. The structure of TBL.

After a brief review of TBL's pedagogic aims, each of the above factors will be addressed. Finally, suggestions are proposed that, if incorporated into the TBL approach, may help to improve the effectiveness of the approach in Japan. These suggestions are intended to apply to TBL in Japan and represent possible solutions rather than endorsement of particular teaching methodologies.

The learning style of Japanese students

Willis (1996) recognizes that TBL's expectations of autonomous learning and student independence represent learning strategies that vary from Japan's pedagogical traditions. Such 'Western cultural approaches' (Jones, 1995:229) can render expectations of student input and active participation unrealistic, as they fail to acknowledge Japanese students' cognitive processing style or 'an individual's preferred and habitual approach to organizing and representing information' (Riding, 2001:48). What has been labeled a 'lack of predominant learning style' (Reid, 1996:336) means that reliance on students for input can be minimal, and can be evident during the initial brainstorming stage, when some students have difficulty completing activities that call for their own creative input. Furthermore, TBL claims that students enjoy working independently from the teacher are not supported by my own research (Burrows, 2005), which reveals a preference for more opportunities to interact directly with the teacher, and to receive reassurance, correction, and encouragement.

The different cognitive profile of Japanese students illustrates they should be taught ways to learn (Jones, 1995), in addition to the language itself. If given the freedom to choose a preferred learning style, they will do so based on their own experience, thereby negating the purpose of being afforded the choice. To overcome these preconceptions, teachers need to raise 'awareness about the pedagogical approaches' (Bygate, 1994:243) and explain the rationale underlying the selection of each task. Students must also be made to recognize that learning an autonomous approach (which TBL ultimately is) is not a simple transmission of knowledge, but a collaboration as they attempt to express their own meanings for their own learning purposes.

Further assumptions of TBL, in regard to students being able to notice or induce the information required, are not supported by a 5-month evaluation (Burrows, 2005). This highlights that it is not enough for students to immerse themselves in the target language and hope acquisition takes place. I am suggesting that students should not simply be provided with 'comprehensible input' (Krashen, 1982), but that it is important to present tasks that tap into, but don't rely on, student learning styles. Without such activities, too heavy a burden may be placed on students ill equipped for and unaccustomed to such learner autonomy.

Student expectations

Due to different teacher–student beliefs in regard to the role of the learner, the classroom will not always be seen as a meeting place between student expectations on the one hand, and curricular content and pedagogical appropriateness on the other. The teacher-centered nature of the Japanese education system 'shapes and maintains students' beliefs and concepts they hold in regard to the language learning process' (Wenden, 1991:34). Like many other Asian countries this system tends to value group consensus, and employs rigid, teacher-centered teaching practices. In such an environment the teacher's knowledge is bestowed upon the student, while s/he passively lets 'the wisdom "pour into" him' (Brown, 1994:17). This results in a reluctance among students to engage, interact with, or question the teacher. As a result, instances of student dissatisfaction are likely when teaching is inconsistent with student beliefs (Burden, 2002). The strength of these expectations is recognized as a potentially significant element when making the transition to the 'apparent randomness' of TBL (Bowen, 2004). Awareness of this discrepancy or 'hotspot,' as referred to in research by Woods (1996:71), is

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potentially problematic as students move from a teacher-centered system to an autonomous learning environment. It is therefore imperative that these kinds of false assumptions and prejudices which underlie students' attitude towards their role in learning are not ignored.

These 'mismatches' between expectation and the teaching approach (Rausch, 2000) clearly illustrate that Japanese students and their foreign language teachers do not share the same understanding of what comprises proper classroom behavior. Nunan (1989) concurs that:

> No curriculum can claim to be truly learner-centered unless the learner's subjective needs and perception relating to the processes of learning are taken into account. (p. 177)

The strength of this influence means that students' knowledge and attitudes are the key to language success, and involving them in the collaborative process, through incorporating their cognitive and learning preferences, is essential.

Socio-cultural differences

Even within the classroom, the situation is not only determined by cognitive and expectancy concerns, but also affective dimensions. These powerful counteracting forces are connected with socio-cultural factors, the most relevant of which is especially prominent in a collectivist country such as Japan:

> …shyness is more prevalent… than in any other culture we surveyed. For 3 in 4, shyness is viewed as a 'problem,' with over 80% labeling themselves as shy… more than any other nation. The Japanese report feeling shy in virtually all social situations… (Zimbardo, 1977)

Such is their strength, these dimensions can often determine the level of participation among students, and even render opportunities to communicate and express feelings unproductive. Consequently, rather than be a motivation to use the L2 (as TBL maintains), TBL activities can often result in prominent use of L1, correctly labeled as 'the most prominent difficulty students experience during a TBL lesson' (Eldridge, 1996, p.306). This can be evident even for tasks which students could easily perform in L2, when the context is personalized and relevant, yet still results in minimal L2 interaction. Other socio-cultural manifestations which can be observed in the Japanese classroom are:

1. Students seldom initiate discussion.
2. Students generally avoid bringing up new topics.
3. Students rarely seek clarification.
4. Students are reluctant to volunteer answers.

(Anderson, cited in Wadden, 1993, p.102)

The significance of this factor is illustrated in the following common complaint among native English teachers in Japan:

> [Students] seldom volunteer answers, a trait that many Western instructors find extremely frustrating. Most Japanese will only talk if specifically called upon, and then only if there is a clear-cut answer. This does not necessarily signify an unwillingness to comply, but may simply indicate that the student is too nervous to respond, or too uncertain of the answer to risk public embarrassment.
>
> (Anderson, cited in Wadden, 1993, p.102)

Willis (1996) acknowledges that the existence of shyness affects *only* the public speaking portion of the task cycle, but assumes this will only be relevant for lower-level students. The suggestion that less emphasis can be put on the presentation stage until the students have gained confidence would seem to expect rapid language development. Such a departure from the task-cycle approach would also not address a large section of the lesson when students would not use L2. Also, this section of the lesson contributes to the accuracy and upgrade, without which it remains unclear what changes should be made.

The structure of TBL

The nature of the task in TBL also has a direct influence on the type and characteristic of the interaction produced, with linguistic forms treated as a vehicle of minor importance (in accordance with Willis' 1990:127 definition). It is even recognized (Nunan, 1999) that certain activities (e.g., categorizing is often used in the pre-task stage) may or may not actually involve the production of language itself. Therefore, the lack of structure, in addition to the linguistic freedom it accords, means that it is the task itself, argues Seedhouse (1999), which actually constrains the kinds of linguistic forms used, in effect minimizing linguistic output.

Another weakness of TBL, cited as one of its main strengths, is its claim to improve student

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motivation. The omission of a focus on form only seems to restrict the lesson to 'teaching how to do tasks better' (Nunan, 2001:279), rather than providing opportunities for students to focus not only on language but also on the learning process itself. As a result, the type of interaction produced during the task-cycle also raises questions about how much students' language proficiency is being extended. It is clear that TBL can over-emphasize the importance of just 'getting the job done' (Robinson, 2001:184) at the expense of improving target language ability. This is supported by Seedhouse (1999) who highlights that TBL interaction often seems 'very unimpressive' (p. 153) as there is:

> A tendency to produce very indexical interaction, (i.e., interaction that is content-bound, inexplicit, and hence obscure to anybody reading the extracts). Interactants in a task seem to produce utterances at the lowest level of explicitness necessary to the successful completion of task. (p. 153)

Lack of empirical evidence refuting such claims has lead to questions about what has actually been proven in TBL. Seedhouse notes the results from the Bangalore project seem to be 'less than conclusive' (1999:154) and only tentatively support the claim that grammar construction can take place through a focus on meaning alone. If the primary function is 'to facilitate the unfolding of the learner's powerful internal syllabus' (Robinson, 2001:184), it appears to be contradicted by evidence (Burrows, 2005) that much of the negotiation occurs in L1. Students seem to distinguish between the tasks, which are conducted in L2, and negotiation of meaning in L1. Therefore, the first objective of using tasks as a means of encouraging more L2 use appears unsuccessful.

Implications

TBL's emphasis on first acquiring lexical forms before grammar does not address the difference between the Japanese and English language. Without a chance to use 'targeted language' (not 'target language'), not just to practice forms but also to achieve tangible results, the limited nature of TBL interaction becomes apparent. Without a more structured lesson, assuming that awareness will occur is presumptuous as it fails to provide the correct context for Japanese students. Students will not start to notice differences; realise preferred learning styles; and put aside cultural, social, and affective factors because of this approach. Without explicit instruction Western teaching strategies will not instigate or motivate a feeling of the onus being on students to develop communicative competence.

Furthermore, a lack of communicative opportunity during the lesson can influence not only linguistic ability but more lastingly motivation. A lack of perceived linguistic improvement is evident with many Japanese university students regarding themselves as beginners, despite almost seven years of instruction. This can affect motivation and result in what McVeigh (2001) terms an 'apathetic attitude' resulting in a loss of academic interest. Students see this failure to improve proficiency as essentially due to a lack of ability. One of the advantages of CLA is the practice exercise which allows students the opportunity to display their ability to use the target language, as well as view their progress as structures become gradually more complex. This provision of opportunities to practice and master each linguistic target has a direct effect on motivation in addition to confidence. This achievement encourages a 'sense of accomplishment, a sense of value in the instruction itself, and a resultant confidence boost' (Burden, 2002). Therefore, although the aim of TBL is not to perfect student production of the target language, this is how it will be viewed by many Japanese students, resulting in any failures of production being perceived negatively (Burden, 2002).

Recommendations

TBL's opportunities to use the L2 freely can be appreciated, yet assume a certain level of linguistic competence. There is much practice that is required before this can be achieved, from simple exercises, to more complex and lengthy activities. In designing task sequences it is important to remember that this process is recognized in the salience of the pedagogic goals of the task. It therefore requires particular emphasis placed on activities that provide students with a sense of achievement and personal accountability, and help them think about the process of language learning and how to approach it more effectively. Also, a focus on teaching the principles of interaction, interdependence, and individualism in the language learning process is also needed.

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These cooperative strategies may alleviate the otherwise negative self-perceptions that evolve from poor individual performances. Repeated failure is demotivating for students, so the concept of a 'reasonable challenge' (Crookes & Schmidt, 1991:46) has to be realistic in what can be achieved.

The different shades of TBL, from those who advocate a far more active role for students (Breen, 1987) to those (Willis, 1996) whose methods are more teacher led, support the possibility for a more fused form incorporating a certain focus on form. In which case, a compromise or hybrid (Nunan, 1989) could be developed which integrates a systematic approach to grammar and lexis in a comprehensive approach adaptable to meet different student needs (Bowen, 2004). This hybrid would need to have a balance between a focus on form, accuracy, and complexity, with a focus on communication. Achieving this balance has resulted in some teachers adopting a mixed approach where form-focused components are added to complement task-based activities. These activities have very specific outcomes, making it easier for students to evaluate their success. Another option could be to incorporate more open tasks which are loosely structured with a less specific goal. To illustrate the point, Palos and Ellis (cited in Robinson, 2001) actually make grammatical structures the object of the task itself, with the intention that students will be attending to particular forms at the same time as engaging in meaningful communication. In this respect students are being presented with language forms, similar to CLA, in order to display that they can be produced automatically. Loschly (cited in Robinson, 2001) goes even further by suggesting it is possible to design tasks in such a way that the use of certain grammatical structures is unavoidable. In other words certain segments of language are being targeted before the task (i.e. pre-teaching) so that they will be more available during the actual task phase. Like CLA there is no guarantee that specific targeted language will be incorporated into actual language use, but these conditions make it more likely.

Although it is generally accepted that language forms targeted will not necessarily become part of the students' repertoire as the result of a particular lesson (as with TBL too), it is more likely that over time, such targeted forms will be incorporated into a developing interlanguage system (Willis and Willis, 1996). These broken-down segments reflect the degree of linguistic difficulty and are seen as part of the conditioning process that allows for 'scientific' assessment. This stimulus has a direct result on the output as it is internalized by imitating without the need for mentalistic interference (Ellis, 1994). Although it is argued that this approach ignores student processing, Krashen (1982) argues that the 'natural order' can be acquired in a predictable order not necessarily determined by linguistic complexity.

Conclusion

Although TBL appears to have strong theoretical and pedagogical arguments which offer students more of a challenge than the display activities used in the CLA, it is my conclusion that it leads to less productive lessons in a collectivist country like Japan. The desire for students to be able to negotiate real situations is a learning objective most English language teachers would aspire to. However, a teaching approach which places too heavy a burden on students is not only unrealistic but also unreasonable. Few would argue that the teacher-dominated, initiation–response–feedback pattern needs to be used more often, but the other extreme of merely furnishing favorable classroom conditions for interaction to take place (Krashen, 1982) also seems equally undesirable.

It is the author's opinion that because of the strength of cognitive and socio-cultural factors, they cannot be overcome, to any significant degree, regardless of the teaching methodology. Their influence may be minimised, but this would require teachers acknowledging and bearing responsibility for adopting teaching methods or methodologies which recognise the importance of culture. To some degree teachers must also evaluate *their* expectations and goals, which may mean adopting activities which may seem too teacher-centred, but meet student expectations and maximise student involvement in the learning process. ■

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